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Franklin, PA

Home to the 'Great Street' of Liberty



In October 13, 2010, the American Planning Association (APA) announced to the nation something that most Franklin area residents already knew...that Downtown Franklin's Liberty Street was a 'Great Street.' This 'Great Street' designation, as defined under that organization's "Great Places in America Program," gives Liberty Street the distinction of being one of the top ten thoroughfares in America for 2010. According to the APA, this honor is bestowed upon streets that "exemplify exceptional character and highlight the role planning has played in creating communities of lasting value."

Liberty Street's importance was evident from its very origin. Historic Franklin was plotted out in 1795 by Andrew Ellicott, the same surveyor that laid out Washington, D.C. And it was Ellicott's visionary foresight that reserved a 100 foot right-of-way for Liberty Street, and curved it at the town's center to mirror the bend that exists in nearby French Creek. At the town's center, Ellicott set aside two large open space spans along Liberty Street, which are today beautiful parks flanking either side of the historic Venango County Courthouse.

Throughout its existence, this downtown section of Liberty Street has been the hub of economic activity in Franklin. Early business leaders invested in the community, and Liberty Street became the focal point for commerce and retail. The

oil boom of the 1860's then brought a wave of prosperity, which resulted in the construction of a mix of architecturally significant buildings, including the twin-spire Italianate Venango County Courthouse, along this stretch. Thanks in part to a Façade Improvement Program initiated in 1983 – and to a host of interested business, civic, and government leaders – the face of Franklin's Downtown looks much the same as it did back then. The historically-preserved building environment, combined with Liberty Street's wide open expanse, paints the backdrop for everything else going on in the district. This is not meant to say that Liberty Street hasn't changed over the years. The once-dirt street was paved with brick, then concrete, then asphalt. Street car service was present from the 1890's to 1926. Diagonal parking was used up until 1967, when Liberty became a busy 4-lane roadway with parallel parking on both sides, as it remains today. Still, the streetscape remains nostalgically similar.

A mainstay as a public gathering spot, Liberty Street has been witness to a variety of City events, from the first call put out for Civil War recruits, to a concerted push for park beautification in the late 1800's, to today's many community offerings and festivals. Back in 1983, the Franklin Area Chamber of Commerce held a 3-hour apple pie baking contest in downtown Fountain Park. Today, Applefest® is a bustling 3-day affair that attracts over 350 vendors to downtown Franklin, along with 75,000 festival-goers descending on this community of 7,000. The success of this festival (many Liberty Street merchants do half of their yearly business during this premiere event)



has spawned a variety of other festivals and events that have inspired the City's slogan – Destination Franklin – It's Always Eventful! Seven major annual festivals now take place throughout the year, beginning with Franklin On Ice in February and ending with Franklin Light Up Night in November. The History Channel's Great Race has twice made stops at Liberty Street. In addition, a farmer's market, summer outdoor concerts, church events, an organ grinders rally, a singing competition, and special downtown shopping promotions – not to mention several quality dining and retail establishments – keep Liberty Street hopping year-round.

In 2004, the City of Franklin undertook a Franklin Downtown Blueprint study, in connection with the PLCM's Blueprints for Pennsylvania's Downtowns® program, with the well-respected downtown consulting firm, HyettPalma, Inc. A large part of the study focused on Liberty Street and what could be done to further enhance it aesthetically, economically, and socially. One of the many recommendations carried out under that plan was the removal of all the parking meters in the 1200 block of Liberty, providing free 2-hour parking instead. This has led to greater parking space turnover, which has aided the retailers and provided a better shopping environment. Extensive rehabilitation of Liberty Street's infrastructure by the City has also enhanced the downtown shopping experience.

In 2010, the League of American Bicyclists awarded Franklin the Bronze Level status of a "Bicycle-Friendly" Community. To encourage bicyclists to come off the extensive network of

recreational trails nearby, the City established a designated bike trail from the Franklin Trailhead to the Downtown. In concert with this, Franklin City Council adopted a Complete Streets Policy, whereby an interdisciplinary approach to the needs of pedestrians and bicyclists is incorporated into all designs of transportation-related improvements in the City, especially in the downtown area. Franklin's goal is to capture a share of those 160,000+ trail users and introduce them to the fine services and establishments awaiting them in the business district on Liberty Street. Two PA Greenway Bike Sojourns have taken place with riders from 23 states, and Franklin's Downtown was included in the itineraries on both trips.

Franklin's Liberty Street is reminiscent of the good old days when downtowns were the heartbeat of the community. It personifies both city and rural life, combining an urban character with people and businesses that are steeped in the rural traditions of friendliness, warmth, and volunteerism. Franklin Mayor Doug Baker probably sums it up best: *"Downtown Franklin is a reflection of the 'can do' spirit that has been a part of our culture throughout the community's history. Liberty Street is the heart of our community and serves as an example of what we can accomplish when we work together toward a common goal."*

Photos:

1. Libertyfest Parade on Liberty Street (photo by Jerry Sowden)
2. Christmastime Streetscape (photo by Jerry Sowden)
3. Liberty Street Architecture (photo by City of Franklin)
4. Nighttime on Liberty Street (photo by Jerry Sowden)
5. Birds-eye View of Applefest (photo by Michael Henderson)
6. Light-Up Night 2010 (photo by Michael Henderson)
7. Bicycle-Friendly Franklin (photo by Jerry Sowden)
8. Downtown Shopping on Liberty (photo by City of Franklin)

